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Against Modernity Western Traditionalism and Islam
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Modernity

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There are many varieties of traditionalism in the West, but only one that really deserves a capital 'T', and only one that modified the understanding of both Islam in the West and modernity in the Islamic world. This is 'Guénonian' Traditionalism, the fruit of the marriage of 19th-century oriental scholarship with the Western esoteric tradition, a movement established by the work of the French religious philosopher René Guénon (1886-1951). Born in the provincial French city of Blois, Guénon lived the last twenty years of his life in Egypt, where he died a Muslim and an Egyptian citizen just before the 1952 Revolution. Despite this, his books and articles draw far more heavily on Hinduism than Islam, and were all written in French and published in Paris. At first, Traditionalists were all Europeans, mostly converts to Islam; today, their number includes born Muslims in the Islamic world and the West.



PHOTO: ANONYMOUS

René Guénon in Cairo shortly before his death.

Traditionalism is at its heart a view which reverses the usual connotations of the terms 'traditional' and 'progressive,' so that 'traditional' is good and 'progressive' bad – or rather, an illusion. There is indeed a progression in human affairs, but the direction is invariably one of decline, and 'progressive' thus becomes a synonym for 'corrupt'. The impact of Traditionalism derives from this essence; once the modern world is understood in terms of decline rather than progress, almost everything else changes. For a Traditionalist, truth is to be found not in the future or in the trivial discoveries of natural science, but in the past. That this is so little recognized today is a natural consequence of the final Dark Age in which we live – an age identified with the Hindu final age, the *kali yuga* – where (in many senses) quantity reigns and quality is eclipsed. To the extent that it is possible, salvation lies in salvaging what remains of the past from the general collapse of the present. For the indi-

vidual, this means following an orthodox master in a valid 'initiatic' tradition. Guénon believed that the last chance of the West as a whole lay in the influence of a spiritual and intellectual elite composed of such individuals.

Traditionalism appeals almost exclusively to disenchanted intellectuals, some of whom join – or form – Traditionalist groups. For others, the encounter with Traditionalism may be a stepping stone to some other religious or political destination, often mainstream Islam.

Traditionalist groups commonly take the form of institutes or centres, and – in the case of Muslim Traditionalists – of Sufi orders. Some sort of institute is often the public face of a Sufi order, occasionally connected with a Masonic lodge. Many institutes have websites* or publish books or journals; members of these groups often write books of their own for the general public, teach at universities, or engage in other public activities. When addressing the general public, however, Traditionalists rarely identify themselves as such.

The Maryamiyya

In institutional terms, the most important result of the encounter of Traditionalism and Islam is without question the Maryamiyya, a Traditionalist Sufi order which derives from an Algerian order, the Alawiyya of Ahmad al-Alawi (1869-1934). Most other important Traditionalist Sufi orders begin their history with the Maryamiyya, and all major Muslim Traditionalist writers were at some point associated with this order or one of its derivatives. The Maryamiyya would, it was hoped by some, be the spiritual and intellectual elite that might save the West.

The Maryamiyya was established by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), a Swiss who joined the Alawiyya in Algeria in 1932, and – under somewhat controversial circumstances – established his own branch of this order in France and Switzerland in the years before the Second World War. Among his early Muslim followers were his contemporaries Michel Vâlsan (1907-74), Titus Burckhardt (1908-84), and Martin Lings (born 1911) – a Rumanian, a Swiss and an Englishman. Vâlsan later established his own order; both Burckhardt and Lings remained with Schuon, and wrote books on Islam which were well received by the general public, books in which Traditionalism is rarely explicit but is nonetheless very present.

By the end of the Second World War, Schuon's Alawi branch had become his own order – the Maryamiyya – and Vâlsan had parted with Schuon and established his own Alawi branch in Paris. Vâlsan's influence is limited to France, where his followers have written for both academic audiences and the general public, and are chiefly responsible for the surprisingly large number of French translations of classic Sufi texts which have been published by general publishers.

Schuon did not begin to attract a following among scholars in the United States until the final decades of the 20th century, when a number of professors of religious studies and of other subjects in American

universities became followers of his. The two most famous of these are probably Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Huston Smith, whose *The Religions of Man* (1958) has now sold over 1,750,000 copies under its original title and its current title, *The World's Religions*. As is the case with other best selling works by Traditionalists, *The Religions of Man* is not overtly Traditionalist, but is inspired by and permeated with Traditionalism. Nasr is one of the most publicly prominent Muslims in the United States, and the author of various well-known books. He is also remarkable as the first major Traditionalist to be Muslim by birth rather than conversion.

The consequences of Traditionalism in the West

Muslim Traditionalists have had little impact on the development of Western civilization, but have been successful in providing an alternative understanding of Islam to that normally found in the West, one with which most Westerners find it far easier to sympathize. Although this has rarely been recognized, it has sometimes been more of a Traditionalist than an Islamic alternative.

In addition to the books on Islam written by Traditionalists such as Nasr and Lings, there have been events such as the 'World of Islam Festival' held in England in 1976, the message of which – Islam as a beautiful and traditional civilization – reached a wide public: the Festival involved many of London's major museums as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury and Queen Elizabeth II, and received wide media coverage. Major events such as this are infrequent, but nonetheless significant. Ten years later (in 1986) for example, an Italian Traditionalist, Felice Pallavicini, happened to be part of the Muslim delegation to a Day of Prayer held in Assisi by Pope John Paul. As a result of this, he received wide and sympathetic coverage in the Italian press for some time. Much of what was then reported as the view of Islam was in fact more Traditionalist than Islamic.

Traditionalism in the Islamic world

Western Traditionalists tend to be reticent about both their Islam and their Traditionalism, especially when they are academics. In contrast, Traditionalists in the Islamic world feel no need to be reticent about their Islam, and have little choice but to be open about their Traditionalism, since the background knowledge of their audiences means that they are unlikely to mistake Traditionalist interpretations of Islam for mainstream interpretations. Traditionalism in the Islamic world also differs from that in the West in terms of its organization. A Western Traditionalist in search of a Sufi order is likely to choose a Traditionalist order for geographic, linguistic and cultural reasons. In the Islamic world, a Traditionalist has plenty of existing mainstream orders from which to choose.

The most important Traditionalist organization in the Islamic world was not a Sufi order but the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, established in 1974 by Seyyed Hossein Nasr with the support of the Shah.

This Academy was a well-financed body, which not only began a project for the study and restoration of Traditional sciences, but also attracted major figures from overseas. Although Nasr fled Iran at the Revolution and has never returned, the Imperial Academy survived with a change of name, and Iranian Traditionalists today participate in debates such as that on religious pluralism, and are regularly interviewed in a number of publications. Their views are regarded with some sympathy from circles within the Basij militia to the Qom seminary.

Traditionalism is also important in parts of the Islamic world where there are no Traditionalist organizations, as for example in Turkey. Large numbers of Traditionalist works were translated into Turkish during the 1980s and 1990s; whilst they have not achieved massive sales, they are widely available, and present a direct if subtle challenge to the fundamental principles and values of the modern Turkish state. They are generally read not by old-fashioned Turkish Muslims but by the educated elite. In the same way that in the West Traditionalism generally appeals to intellectuals, in the Islamic world it generally appeals to Westernized intellectuals, or at least to intellectuals familiar with Western currents of thought.

Traditionalism and Islam

In Western terms, Traditionalism is primarily an intellectual explanation and justification of that alienation from contemporary modernity that certain Westerners feel, and a path into Islam for many of those who find this explanation convincing. In Islamic terms, it is not just a condemnation of Western modernity, but also a reaffirmation of one particular variety of Islam. It is of little interest to radical or political Islamists, endorsing as it does what may be called pre-Salafi Islam. Even in these terms, however, it differs somewhat from mainstream interpretations, most obviously in its emphasis on the so-called 'transcendent unity' of religions. For a Traditionalist, Islam is but one among many expressions of an essential religious truth that is in certain senses greater than Islam. Such views have caused real tension between Muslim Traditionalists and other Muslims. ◆

Notes

* Surveyed and linked at my site: www.traditionalists.net

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